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Sterling woman hopes to be first disabled person on shuttle

By Tim Farmer
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Linda McCarthy said she feels it is ironic that the discovery that she has a crippling disease could also lead to the fulfillment of a lifelong dream: to fly in space.

It was five years ago that McCarthy, 35, was diagnosed as having Multiple Sclerosis (MS), after as many years of not knowing why her leg would become numb and go limp, and she has fought a continuous battle since that time to maintain her personal freedom.

Last year she began another, simultaneous battle, this one with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) to become the first handicapped person in space.

Far from a "token payload," McCarthy wants to be a living experiment for a host of tests done in weightlessness, hopefully to provide insight toward a cure for MS and other afflictions.

"I really want them to do funny things to me. I want them to test my blood and my balance system, and then do the same tests on the ground. It would be like donating my body to science and being able to stick around to see what they do with it," said McCarthy, a federal employee who lives in Sterling.

Her efforts began late last summer when friends told of her about a section of abill in Congress that ties authorization of funds for NASA with a plan to fly a "physically disabled American" (McCarthy prefers the word "challenged") aboard the shuttle.

The bill, House Resolution 1714 and Senate Bill 1278, the NASA Authorization Act of 1986, was passed just before Thanksgiving with the mandate for a handicapped passenger left in, and that's when McCarthy sailed into action, writing Rep. Frank Wolf (R-Va.) to enlist him in her efforts, as well as NASA, Sen. John Warner (R-Va.), Sen. Paul Trible, Jr. (R-Va.) and Dr. John V. Dugan, staff director of the U.S. House of Representatives.

So far, Wolf has been the only one to reply, saying he was "delighted to assist" with her campaign and forwarding a copy of her letter to NASA as a gentle reminder that McCarthy is serious.

McCarthy says she is very serious about her goal, and her story attracted greater attention after a Washington television station, WDCM Channel 9, learned of her efforts.

McCarthy was interviewed by Channel 9 reporter Jane Van Ryan in front of the shuttle prototype Enterprise at Dulles Airport for that story, standing on the runway where her grandfather's dairy farm was before the airport was built. "It was meant to be, I'm convinced," she said. "Now all I've got to do is convince NASA."

But McCarthy said NASA is unresponsive so far, and is hesitant to send a physically disabled person into space because of possible complications should the mission have to abort and the astronauts need to leave the space capsule quickly.

McCarthy is quick to point out, though, that she is only limited during flare-ups of the disease, which occur three or four times per year. She notes that she was able to attend the summer Olympics in Los Angeles in 1984, and she didn't miss a bus once, an accomplishment of which even "normal," healthy individuals would be proud.

Perhaps even more convincing is McCarthy's active lifestyle, which includes a full time job as well as jogging, swimming, cross country skiing (her license tags on her car say "I CC SKI"), not to mention that she ran in the 1984 Stroh's Run for Liberty race in Washington to help restore the Statue of Liberty.

Despite her physically challenged status, McCarthy maintains a sense of humor about her disease. "If my body was a General Motors product it would have been recalled," she said.

But life is not always easy for McCarthy. At the best of times, she is as active as anyone, or moreso; during the worst of times she has to spend six to eight hours at a time connected to a machine which feeds a medication, ACTH, intravenously into her system to combat the effects of the disease, which causes her right leg and arm to go numb and stiffen.

But she quickly notes that she is one of a few MS'ers (she said they prefer not to be called patients, because they really aren't) in the Washington area allowed to stay at home during the treatments, and

she is able to maintain her freedom because of that fact.

During the early course of diagnosis and treatment of her disease, she required long hospital stays and excruciating tests. While in the hospital for an extended period, McCarthy

th began working on a book about a handicapped girl who is inspired by a handicapped horse.

She said it is based on her own experience with a horse named Klute she adopted which had arthritis so bad that she had to make the painful decision to put the animal to sleep. Her green eyes fill with tears as she relates the story and remembers the cool September nights she sat on a fence in the moonlight, talking with the horse, which seemed to share and understand her feelings.

Her book is now finished and in the hands of a publisher, and she said she hopes it will be an inspiration to others who suffer from some sort of physical challenge.

Space flight, however, has always been a dream for her, even before learning of the opportunity that may come her way. Her two greatest idols are Sally Ride and the Statue of Liberty, she said, and the hope that she may follow Sally Ride's footsteps fuels her continuing efforts to make that dream a reality.

Her interest in space flight is so great, she said she spends much of her spare time at the National Air and Space Museum, where she hopes to one day conduct tours in sign language for deaf visitors (she can converse fluently in sign language and has even signed at mass for deaf parishioners).

She said she has seen the movie "The Dream is Alive" at the Air and Space Museum 14 or 15 times and loves to fly in hot air balloons, even though her diagnosis as an MS'er prevents her from obtaining a balloonist license.

And until NASA makes their choice, she said she will do everything possible to ensure that she is the best candidate for the job. She maintains a strict high-carbohydrate, low-fat diet and exercises regularly on a Nordic track, a machine which simulates the motion of cross-country skiing.

"I realize that what I do will have some bearing on their decision," she said. "I have to be able to show them I'm ready."

But the question appears not to be whether McCarthy is ready for NASA, but whether NASA is ready for McCarthy. "It's something I've accepted and I just hope NASA has the wherewithal to accept it, too," she said. "I'll get by with my friends and the help of the big Flight Director in the sky."



Times-Mirror Staff Photo/Tim Farmer

Linda McCarthy, a Sterling resident, poses in front of the space shuttle prototype Enterprise which now sits on the runway at Dulles Airport. McCarthy is hoping to become the first handicapped person in space, in accordance with a bill passed that mandates NASA to send a disabled American on a shuttle mission.